

The Grand Priory of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem.

THE history of the Red Cross movement, which figures to-day so largely in the public eye, when its wearers have gone forth in their thousands to tend the wounded on the field of battle or in the hospital at the base, is centred round and derives its origin from the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

From this most ancient Order which possesses an unbroken record, dating back to the eleventh century, is descended the Grand Priory of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, and this in its turn brought into existence the St. John Ambulance Brigade as we know it to-day.

JERUSALEM.

With rare interruptions, a hospital had existed in the Holy City from the third century, ever since it had become a centre of Christian pilgrimage. Early in the eleventh century certain merchants of Amalfi had purchased the site of the Latin hospital established by Charlemagne—destroyed in 1010, with all the other Christian establishments, by order of the fanatical Caliph Hakim Biamrillah—and had there founded a hospital for pilgrims, served by Benedictines which subsequently was dedicated to St John the Baptist.

When in 1087 the Crusaders besieged the Holy City, the Hospice was in charge of a body of men calling themselves “The Poor Brethren of the Hospital of St. John.” The Order was, in its early stages, a purely healing brotherhood, unlike the great rival Order of the Knights Templars, which began as a military organisation. From the moment of the entry of the Crusaders the Hospice, then under the headship of a certain brother Gerard, grew greatly in importance and wealth. Donations and privileges were showered on the institution from all over the Holy Land and Europe. Princes, nobles, and prelates, from Provence, Spain, France, England, Portugal and Italy vied with each other in supporting this stronghold of Christianity in the Holy City, now delivered from the grip of the Saracen. By the time of Gerard’s death in 1120 the institution was a great power throughout Christendom.

It was Raymond du Puy, successor to Gerard, who gave the Order its military character. The armed defence of pilgrims to the Holy Land was no doubt already part of its functions, but it was a renewal of activity on the part of the Saracens which turned the healing brotherhood into a redoubtable military organisation. With the sanction of Pope Pascale II., the brothers were constituted as an Order of Knighthood by Raymond du Puy, who assumed the title of Grand Master. The “cross argent on a field gules,” or, in other words, the white cross on a red ground, henceforward a power for centuries throughout the Mediterranean, was adopted as their armorial bearings; and a black robe with the eight-pointed white cross on the left breast, symbolic of the eight Beatitudes, as their distinctive dress in times of peace. The institution was at the height of its power when in 1187 Saladin drove the Christians from Jerusalem.

ACRE.

The Knights removed to Acre, where they erected great buildings, and played such an important part in the defence of the town that it became known as St. Jean d’Acre.

CYPRUS.

In 1291 the Christians were driven wholly out of Palestine by the Saracens, and the Order removed to Cyprus, where their headquarters

were the Castle of Kolossi, which is still standing, and which is partly the property of the English Order to-day.

RHODES.

In 1310 they removed to the Island of Rhodes, which admirably suited their purpose as a stronghold in the inland sea, and there set about building a fortress which should withstand the most desperate attacks of the Infidel. The Knights built a large war fleet, and became generally so powerful that the Turks, after their capture of Constantinople, determined to suppress this bulwark of the Cross against the growing power of the Crescent. The Turks attacked the Island in 1480 with an enormous fleet and army, but were beaten off, after terrible assaults, by the Knights under Grand Master Peter d'Aubusson. Rhodes stood impregnable against the power of the Turks and helped to stem the tide of Ottoman successes which threatened to overwhelm Europe.

There was a period of comparative peace for over 40 years, but in 1522 the Turks attacked Rhodes again, when De L'Isle Adam was Grand Master of the Order. After a fierce siege and an heroic defence lasting six months the Knights were compelled to surrender, but on favoured terms, being allowed to leave the Island within twelve days in their own galleys, and with their arms and property.

MALTA.

After some years of wandering, the Knights next settled down in Malta, still under De L'Isle Adams. They found it a barren rock, but set to work to fortify it to such good purpose that thirty-five years later, in 1565, they were able to beat off a terrible attack by the Turks, who lost thirty thousand men, with the loss of only 260 Knights and 8,000 soldiers. The siege was watched with keenest anxiety by all the princes of Europe, and prayers were issued by Queen Elizabeth to be read in all the Churches of England for the defence of Christendom, so sorely menaced.

On the rise of the maritime power of the elective Dukedoms of Venice and Genoa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Knights of St. John slowly lost influence in the Mediterranean, though they continued to maintain a fleet at Malta and to capture Corsairs, a training in expeditions at sea being the first duty of every young Knight. At length, after the gradual waning of their naval activities and the comparative luxury and idleness of their life at Malta, came the seizure of the large revenues from their French estates by the Directory of the French Revolution in 1792. The blow was completed in 1798 by the appearance before Malta of Napoleon's fleet and transports, then on their way to Egypt. Some treachery and the weakness of the Order's leaders at the time induced the Grand Master to capitulate without fighting. The Knights were dispersed in ships to their native lands, while Napoleon, leaving a French garrison, proceeded to Egypt. After the battle of the Nile, Malta was taken by the British fleet and became a British possession.

THE ORDER IN ENGLAND.

The history of the Order in England is not illuminated by the same wonderful passages of battles with Saracen and Turk, but it is none the less full of historical interest. About the year 1130 one, Jordan de Briset of Eltham, in Kent, gave to the Order ten acres of land in Clerkenwell, where the Knights built their chief home in England, and on which site the headquarters of the St. John Ambulance Brigade now is! At the beginning of the fourteenth century the Order was divided into the eight nations, or tongues, of Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, Castile, England, and Germany, and the chief dignities of the Order were severally appropriated to the principals of the various nations, the head of the Order in England being called the Turcopilier, or Commander of the Cavalry.

THE BUILDINGS IN CLERKENWELL.

The first building in England was on a large and impressive scale, consisting of a crypt, a choir, and a circular nave, the other buildings of the Priory comprising, so far as is known, a great hall, dormitories, cloisters, armoury, and a gate-house. The head of the Order in England was the Lord Prior of St. John's, who took precedence of all other lay barons in the House of Lords. In 1381 the Lord Prior, Sir Robert Hales, was beheaded by the rebels under Wat Tyler, at the same time as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Priory Buildings were burnt, but were replaced later. The Lord Prior, Sir Thomas Docwra, rebuilt the gate-house in 1504, and inserted the large windows still existing in the Priory Church. At the dissolution of the religious houses the Priory of the Hospitallers was the last to be suppressed, and during the remainder of his reign King Henry VIII. used the buildings partly as a store-house for his munitions of war, and partly as a home for the Lady Mary.

The Priory appears soon to have been broken up into the hands of various owners, and to-day, with the exception of a few cellars, nothing remains but the choir and crypt of the church and the gate-house of the Priory, now known as St. John's Gate, the headquarters of the Order in England.

Early in the nineteenth century the Venerable Ordinary Council of the Order sitting in Paris, consisting chiefly of French Knights who had survived the expulsion of the Order from Malta by Napoleon, re-established the Order in England, with the proviso that admission might be extended to members of the Anglican Church. The status of the Order was confirmed by Queen Victoria, who, in 1888, granted a new charter which to-day controls the work of the English Grand Priory and its departments.

THE ST. JOHN AMBULANCE ASSOCIATION.

Such is the great background of history from which the St. John Ambulance Association and its offshoot, the St. John Ambulance Brigade, have evolved, and never surely had a good cause such inspiring memories to draw upon.

The device of the Red Cross was adopted at the time of the Geneva Convention in 1863, the Congress adopting the arms of the City of Geneva, only reversing its colours. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem in England, as it then existed, was represented at the International Conference of Red Cross Societies held in Berlin (*absit omen*) in 1869, but the real beginning of the ambulance movement, as we know it, dates from the Franco-German War of 1870, when it was seen that no Red Cross Society could fulfil its duties in time of war unless it were properly organised in time of peace. What has been done for field hospitals by Florence Nightingale has been done for ambulance work generally by the St. John's Ambulance Association. For the last forty years its powers and organisation have been steadily developing, not only in the British Isles but throughout the Empire, so that India, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and all the other Dominions have now their own splendid organisations, while in Jerusalem it maintains the British Ophthalmic Hospital. All these are integral parts of the Ambulance Depot of the Order of St. John.

IN TIME OF PEACE.

Though war is now in the minds of all of us, let us show what the Brigade is always ready to do in time of peace. On Tuesday, October 14th, 1913, there was a terrible colliery explosion at Senghenydd, in South Wales. Here is an extract from the report of the Superintendent who was in charge of the Brigade workers at the scene of the disaster:—

“I arrived at the colliery about two hours after the explosion occurred, taking with me some stretchers, medical haversacs, bandages, and oxygen reviving apparatus, etc., and in a short time members of our Brigade began to arrive on the scene. By the afternoon 106 men had reported themselves,

bringing with them a good supply of stretchers, haversacs, splints, bandages, and blankets. Several men of the Brigade went down the pit with exploring parties to render assistance in rescue work. On the Tuesday night eighteen men were brought out alive. Five of the St. John men were with the exploring party, and helped to bring these up, and attended to them, and handed them over to nurses in the temporary ambulance station. During the second day and night St. John men and nurses turned up at all hours from various parts fully prepared to undertake anything required of them in such numbers that I had to send many home until required. During the week 216 St. John officers and men reported themselves, and 29 St. John nurses."

HEROIC AMBULANCE MEN.

Here the men of the Brigade worked not only at the pit-head, where the "cases" dealt with included cuts, burns, wounds, and men who were "gassed" by the deadly fumes in the mine, but they descended far underground to the workings, helping the rescue parties in their terribly dangerous work, carrying out survivors, snatching them from the borderland of death by giving "first aid" on the spot. And what was done at Senghenydd has been done elsewhere, in varying circumstances, scores and hundreds of times. The men of the Brigade are to be found in every railway company, and in all the principal mines, factories, foundries and industrial concerns throughout the country.

IN TIME OF WAR.

A monument in St. John's Church at the ancient head-quarters of the Brigade, unveiled by King George, commemorates the services of over 70 of the Brigade who laid down their lives in carrying on their work in the South African and Chinese Wars of 1899-1902.

We are now at war—the grimdest and the most terrible war the world has ever seen. What are the members of the St. John Ambulance Brigade doing now? The answer is that 5,000 of them are already helping the armies in the field, and four times as many men volunteered as were asked for. During the first week after the outbreak of war over 4,000 brigade men were mobilised for service with the Royal Navy and the Army. Since then, further contingents have been sent to France, and they have been in the thick of the work at Mons, at Cambrai, at Meaux, on the Aisne, and at other battles which will henceforth be inscribed gloriously on the banners of British regiments.

APPEAL TO PUBLIC.

At this fateful time, when England and the Empire are drawn into a conflict beside which even the desperate fighting of the old Knights of St. John pales into insignificance, it will be seen what a power for help and usefulness is the oldest Red Cross organisation. In times of peace the Order does not appeal to the public for subscriptions. But now in this great hour of our history, when, in addition to the expense of mobilising thousands of men, there are funds required for the equipment and maintenance of the hospitals of the Order at home and abroad, there is every need for the public to come forward and support a national organisation which works to the noblest of all ends—the succour of friend and foe alike on the field of battle. The spirit which inspires the St. John Ambulance Brigade has its roots in the earliest years of chivalry, when the Knights of St. John combined, for the first time in the history of the world, the art of healing with valour and prowess as soldiers of the Cross. Through the centuries the Order has endured, with a history more full and stimulating than that of any royal dynasty.

The men in the dark uniform are one of the legacies bequeathed to the world by the Christian knights who, centuries ago, battled with the hosts of Saladin. The men and women of the St. John Ambulance Brigade belong to the oldest healing society in the world.